

## Chapter & Verse

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### THE POETRY OF CHILDHOOD

A few weeks ago, I spoke to an elderly lady who told me that she could remember very little from her ten years of formal education. She can no longer do long division or long multiplication; she now hasn't a clue what an isthmus is or who was on the British throne before Queen Victoria and she has forgotten every one of the major exports of British Columbia. However, what she does remember are the few poems which she was introduced to by her Primary school teacher, poems which she learnt off by heart and which have remained with her throughout her long life. She told me that, from time to time, a line of those poems will come unbidden into her mind and give a voice to a particular experience.

I was forcibly struck by the extraordinary power which remembered poems can have when I read the account by the American, Tom Sutherland who was held hostage in Beirut on the 1980's. He said that when he was blindfolded and chained to a wall for month after month, not knowing if or when he would be taken out and shot, he would console himself by reciting those poems of Robert Burns which he had been fortunate enough to have learnt off by heart as a child. He said that by repeating those loved poems to himself, he helped preserve his sanity and a sense of humanity. I like to think of him repeating lyrics such as *A Red, Red Rose* with the sublime images of eternity in the following verse:

Till a the seas gang dry, my dear,  
And the rocks melt wi the sun;  
I will love thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o life shall run

Speaking to the poetry loving lady and reading Tom Sutherland's account, has led to think of those childhood poems which mean most to me, poems or lines of poems which have remained with me like the most loyal of friends. By childhood poems, I don't necessarily mean poems written specifically with an audience of children in mind - I find many such poems moronic - but poems which through their imagination, depth of feeling, clarity and verbal music can appeal to readers of all ages. I was fortunate to be introduced to quite a number of poems in the very small Primary School I attended on Islay, many of which I learnt off by heart and have never forgotten. It's often been discovered that many people with some form of dementia can recall certain lines of poetry or of song, particularly hymns, when they can remember very little else.

One of the earliest poems I came to love is a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson called *The Land Of Counterpane* in which a sick child, through the power of his imagination, alleviates his loneliness with soldiers and ships and becomes the master of all he surveys.

A poem I loved for the sheer beauty of its verbal music, it must be one of the most mellifluous lyrics ever written in English, is by Walter de la Mare and is about an old shepherd called *Nod* who

### The Land of Counterpane

When I was sick and lay a-bed,  
I had two pillows at my head,  
And all my toys beside me lay  
To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so  
I watched my leaden soldiers go,  
With different uniforms and drills,  
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in  
fleets  
All up and down among the sheets;  
Or brought my trees and houses out,  
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still  
That sits upon the pillow-hill,  
And sees before him, dale and plain,  
The pleasant land of counterpane.

gathers his flock at evening with  
the last two verses evoking a sense  
of the deepest peace. T.S. Eliot was  
a great admirer of de la Mare and  
wrote a poem in his honour.

### from Nod

His lambs outnumber a noon's  
roses,  
Yet, when night shadows fall,  
His blind old sheep-dog,  
Slumber-soon,  
Misses not one of all.

His are the quiet steps of  
dreamland,  
The waters of no more pain,  
His ram's bell rings 'neath an arch  
of stars,  
"Rest, Rest, and rest again."

Sometimes the poems which appeal to children can be surprising and one of the poems I loved most when I was eleven is by Thomas Hardy and which has the rather ponderous title of *In Time Of 'The Breaking of Nations.'*

The fact that I had no idea what a *wight* was did nothing to lessen by pleasure in reading the slow rhythms of these lines which their sense of stubborn endurance.

The poem of my childhood which moved me almost to tears was another by Walter de la Mare. It's simply about an old donkey who has been put out to grass: there are echoes of this poem in Philip Larkin's famous poem, *At Grass*. Ironically for a poem which can appeal so much to a child, it's about age and loneliness and resigning oneself to imminent death. But despite its poignancy, it is shot through with the most wonderfully lyrical descriptions of nature: *But dusk would come on the apple boughs*. The closer one is to death, the more beautiful the natural world is perceived to be. As the playwright, Dennis Potter said in what he sensed would be his final spring, the plum tree below his bedroom window appeared clothed in the *whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be*.



*In Time Of 'The Breaking of Nations'*

Only a man harrowing clods  
In a slow silent walk  
With an old horse that stumbles and nods  
Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame  
From the heaps of couch-grass;  
Yet this will go onward the same  
Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight  
Come whispering by:  
War's annals will cloud into night  
Ere their story die.

from **Nicholas Nye**

Alone with his shadow he'd drowse in the meadow,  
Lazily swinging his tail,  
At break of day he used to bray,--  
Not much too hearty and hale;  
But a wonderful gumption was under his skin,  
And a clean calm light in his eye,  
And once in a while; he'd smile:--  
Would Nicholas Nye.

Seem to be smiling at me, he would,  
From his bush in the corner, of may,--  
Bony and ownerless, widowed and worn,  
Knobble-kneed, lonely and gray;  
And over the grass would seem to pass  
'Neath the deep dark blue of the sky,  
Something much better than words between me  
And Nicholas Nye.

But dusk would come in the apple boughs,  
The green of the glow-worm shine,  
The birds in nest would crouch to rest,  
And home I'd trudge to mine;  
And there, in the moonlight, dark with dew,  
Asking not wherefore nor why,  
Would brood like a ghost, and as still as a post,  
Old Nicholas Nye.



**AGM**

**Sunday 8th March  
2:00PM**

**Red Cross St Johns Hall  
Woodbridge**

I'm arranging an evening of poetry and music as part of the Woolpit Arts Festival on Friday, 5<sup>th</sup> June.

If any member of the SPS has a favourite childhood poem they'd like to come and read at the event, please email your poem, along with a brief explanation as to why you chose it and I'll do my best to include it in the programme. Send your email to [president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk](mailto:president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk)